

State Board of Education: New revenue needed to pay for schools

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Chinook Middle School Cameron Christensen, Aaron Quarles and Tristan Chavez work on their watershed design experiment Dec. 4, 2013, in teacher Charlie SittingBull's class. The engineering based design project offers students a two-day prep session to learn about watershed theory and effects including erosion and storm run-off, then are tasked with building an operating watershed model. North Thurston Public School officials say science has been an emphasis for the district, and has helped improve student achievement on standardized science tests.

STEVE BLOOM — Staff photographer

Yet another state educational agency is telling lawmakers that they'll have to come up with new tax money to fully fund public schools.

The State Board of Education this month took the unusual step of telling the Legislature that there's no way the state can fully fund basic education without new revenue.

It's the first time the nonpartisan state board — which provides policy oversight of the state's education system — has formally and explicitly weighed in on how lawmakers should come up with the money to comply with a court order to fully fund basic education by 2018.

In a resolution the board unanimously adopted this month, members said “there can be no credible plan to make ample provision for public schools that does not include new revenue to the state budget.”

The State Board of Education approved its resolution the same week the state Supreme Court held the state in contempt for the Legislature's failure to come up with a long-term education funding plan.

Ben Rarick, the executive director of the State Board of Education, said board members wanted to “push the conversation to the next level ... which is where the tough choices are.”

Rarick said that projected increases in sales tax revenues won't be enough to meet the obligations of the Supreme Court's McCleary decision, nor will “assuming efficiencies throughout state government.” In its 2012 McCleary ruling, the Supreme Court said the state wasn't meeting its constitutional duty to amply fund basic education and must do so by 2018.

“New revenue will have to be part of the solution,” Rarick said Friday. “It's not something that can be resolved through a tinkering approach.”

Cutting other government programs also poses problems, Rarick said. The board's resolution states that cuts to social service programs could “compromise progress to the goals of the program of basic education.”

State schools chief Randy Dorn, who leads the state Office of the Superintendent Public Instruction, has similarly also advocated for new taxes to help raise money for public schools. Dorn is one of 16 members of the State Board of Education, which also includes seven members approved by the governor, five members selected by school districts, two students and a representative of the private school system.

State Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, said the State Board of Education's recent resolution “is adding to the growing chorus of voices saying that this is going to take more revenue.”

“The members of the board have been working for years on reform and more efficient delivery,” said Rolfes, who is one of Senate Democrats' leaders on education issues. “For them to say it needs revenue as opposed to that there are still improvements we need to make, that is meaningful.”

But some lawmakers question whether relying on new tax revenue to fund education is a constitutionally sound approach.

State Rep. Chad Magendanz, the leading Republican on the House Education Committee, said that raising taxes to fund education could backfire, since voters in Washington can overturn tax increases on a referendum vote.

He and other Republicans suggested this month that the Legislature look to fully fund education using existing revenues, then look at tax measures only to fund other programs that — unlike education — aren't defined in the state constitution as a "paramount duty."

"I think according to the court's own words in the McCleary case that basic education should be funded as a first priority, before any other statutory requirements and obligations," said Magendanz, who is from Issaquah. "If we put together a solution for McCleary that depends on new taxes that could fail on referendum, we're not doing that."

While the Supreme Court held the state in contempt this month over the Legislature's failure to make progress on education funding, the court delayed any sanctions until after the Legislature's 2015 budget-writing session. Lawmakers from both parties have emphasized the need for progress next year, setting up a fight over how to add at least \$3.5 billion to the state budget by 2017-2018.

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